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# **Mobile moralities: Ethical consumption in the digital realm**

**Kim Humphery,  
RMIT University, Australia**

**Tim Jordan,  
University of Sussex, UK**

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## **Introduction**

Transformations in social and political practices that involve the mass use of information and digital technologies are widely recognised to be part of encompassing cultural and economic shifts, variously designated as neoliberalism, globalisation, network society, late-modernity, and so on. The nature of these broader shifts continues to be deeply questioned even as the use and meaning of the technocultures that in part define them are themselves contested and developed (Jordan, 2015; Dyer-Witheford, 2015; Goggan, 2011). At the same time – though in a quite different register – a widespread movement around ‘ethical consumption’ has developed in the West. This is a complex and often contradictory politics that, at its most radical, contests an unsustainable and inequitable western consumerism by adopting alternative consumption practices (Littler, 2008 & 2011; Humphery, 2010 & 2011; Barnett, Cloke, Clarke and Malpass, 2011; Lekakis, 2013a). Ethical consumption is also a politics that has made increasing use of the digital realm as an activist medium. In recognising this connection between information technologies and consumption activism, this paper examines and theoretically interrogates a range ‘mobile apps’ that attempt to guide and support alternative consumption choices.

We are particularly interested in this article to explore the increasing *intersection* of ethical consumption and digital technocultures; and to delineate what can be learned about both – though, especially the former – from their crossover. In using the term technocultures, we refer to the way in which technologies and cultures are intimately intertwined (Giddings and Lister 2011; Jordan 2015). In the discussion that follows, we examine the significant changes technocultures can bring to social movements through

their ability to allow users of apps to be more readily connected to each other, potentially building communities of interest and/or activism in politically expansive ways. We discuss also the potential for contemporary technocultures to allow app users to feedback information in ways that affect app design, content and structure. Most significantly for this article, we examine whether and how such digital affordances affect the way ethical consumption itself may be conceived and pursued.

In the first half of this discussion we survey and analyse a select range of ethical consumption applications, providing a tentative classification of the different types of apps now available and identifying political fault lines in their design and use. We also briefly delineate a key issue in the politics of the digital – concerning ‘the horizontal’ and ‘the open’ – that serves to contextualise how we might begin to interpret an ethical consumption gone mobile. We then move to further examine the still relatively nascent intersection of the ethical and the digital, suggesting that the rise of ethical consumption apps tends currently to disclose the complexities and limits both of ethical consumption as a conceptual frame and of constructions of digital politics as ‘activist’. This contention is, in the second half of the paper, placed in the context of the contemporary critique of ethical consumption as oppositional politics; a critique we seek to constructively extend through the lens of the applications we have examined. We move also, in more speculative vein, to identifying how both ethical consumption and politicised digital practices share a number of tensions; discussed, here, through ideas of complicity, subversion and agency. Finally, we conclude with the suggestion that an intersection of the ethical and the digital in the realm of consumption speaks to an unrealised political potential characteristic of both terrains.

### **Apps, mobility and ethical consumption**

Without doubt, the term ‘ethical consumption’ names a range of ways in which consumer choice is being ‘responsibilized’, to conceptually borrow from the work of Clive Barnett and colleagues (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke and Malpass, 2011). Politically, the term broadly invokes an interconnected but sometimes divergent set of concerns for environmental sustainability as well as the sustainability of local economies, communities and material cultures, for Fair Trade and global conditions of inequality, for animal rights, and for practices such simple and slow living. Across the field of ethical consumption, these various issues inform how a product – or, more accurately, the manufacturers and companies that produce or brand a particular product – are evaluated. Indeed, systems of evaluation have been central to ethical consumption as a political project.

Many readers will be aware of the availability of conventional printed guides to ethical, sustainable, and Fair Trade purchasing; one of the earliest of which was *The Green*

*Consumer Guide*, first published in 1988 (Elkington & Hailes, 1988; Hailes, 2007). Of the more general guides currently available some of the most widely read include *The Good Shopping Guide*, first published in the UK in 2002 and now in its 11<sup>th</sup> edition (Ethical Marketing Group, 2012) and, in Australia, the *Shop Ethical!* guide, first published in 2008 and now in its 7<sup>th</sup> edition (Ethical Consumer Group, 2014). These printed guides were created and established either before or during the rise to mass use of mobile and digital applications; and they have, in many instances, served as the informational basis of such apps. Accordingly, the printed guide has been drawn into processes of ‘digitization’ – the turning of an analogue resource into a digital one. This process has been further marked by a temporal overlap between the analogue and the digital. As the printed ethical consumer guide arose – and eventually became subject to digitization – there simultaneously arose media objects that were always digital in form, such as websites providing searchable ethical information on products. It is, however, the mobile application that is most interesting in suggesting a techno-political shift in conceptualising the ethical consumer.

As a digital tool, downloadable onto various mobile devices, ‘ethical consumption apps’ are a relatively recent phenomenon; with most such applications emerging since 2010. Currently, there are three slightly different types of ethical consumption apps available. The first and second types lean heavily on the older, print-based, approaches to providing consumers with research-based information on everyday products in relation to their impact on the environment and on immediate and distant others (such as third world workers, local producers, and non-human animals). Both of these first and second types of app – that are largely differentiated by operational features – are deeply affected by processes that are characteristic of the transformation of analogue into digital. A third type of application is more intently focused on crowdsourced information (about both ethical product and place); and here we begin to find more ‘originally digital’ techniques, a term we will return to below. To complicate matters further, there is considerable overlap between these application types; such that our division is a broad heuristic for making sense of the various apps now downloadable. Before moving on to survey and evaluate these apps, however, we need to say a little more about our interpretative frame.

A key issue in the transition to the digital and the use of what we are calling originally digital techniques is the extent to which the content and even nature of an app can be directly affected by those who use it. Of importance also is the extent to which the construction of ‘communities of interest/activism’ is facilitated by an app, especially by putting users into contact with each other. One example of this dynamism is, indeed, the idea of crowdsourcing information in which those utilising a particular app can not only draw on the content of the application but also upload further information and ideas. It

is clear, then, that the history of digital media-objects in this context is complex because there are two underlying processes that interweave. First, there are analogue media-objects that are converted into digital; a process that raises questions about the differences or similarities between an analogue and digital version of a given body of information. Second, there are processes and objects that only exist in the digital realm, often called ‘natively digital’ though we prefer the term ‘originally digital’. Both these processes are present in the array of mobile applications that currently facilitate ethical consumption. Indeed, these apps potentially signal a transformation in the use of and relation to information; one that offers lessons about the meaning of the digital for ethical consumption and vice versa.

Here, we invoke notions of the horizontal and the open in framing how we might conceptualise ethical consumption apps. In using the term ‘horizontal’ we refer to the (digitally enabled) process through which those with a specific interest or allegiance – in our case, ethical consumption – may become ‘peers’ in a digital network that shares information. This sharing process is one that does not operate top to bottom (i.e. vertically) but across the network, each peer being able to provide and validate information (Jordan, 2015: 65-80; Galloway and Thacker, 2007). Such a network must also define for itself an ‘openness’; networks of this type must engage in decisions about how someone is to be identified as a peer and, in the process, such networks become open or closed to different kinds of actors who can contribute and authorise the information that underpins and makes the network (Berry, 2008, Jordan, 2015: Ch.4). This means that specific, politically contextualised technocultures – such as those surrounding the use of a particular ethical consumption app – vary in the degree to which they enable the horizontal and/or open. While there has been extensive debate concerning the meaning of these terms in relation to the digital realm, we nevertheless suggest that a key political question to ask is to what extent a given technocultural terrain supports and facilitates the generation – through horizontality and openness – of a community of interest and/or activists.

This question is of particular importance in the context of ethical consumption’s own internal contradictions between being, on the one hand, a highly individualised mode of consumption choice and, on the other, a social movement advocating the transformation of economies and social practices. It is a question also that echoes Hector Postigo’s contention that in digital contexts ‘Culture ... is meaningless or increasingly alienated from a citizenry *unless that citizenry can participate in its production.*’ (Postigo, 2012: 9). Postigo’s analysis (focussed on the digital rights movement) comes to the conclusion that, in all digital contexts, users must necessarily participate in order to become ‘citizens’, as he defines them; that is, to become politically active. It is a point well made; and we can ‘test’ this contention across the various types of ethical consumption app currently available.

The most static of such applications are simply digital versions of existing guides. At the margins, this first type of app makes minor use of digital techniques to foster more potential activity by and between users; and these apps are often linked directly with the websites of campaign organisations. An example is the Australian ‘Shop Ethical’ application, with version one launched in February 2012 (and the latest version released in November 2014, at the time of writing). This is the digital interface of the previously mentioned printed guide and is connected to the Melbourne-based campaign website of the Ethical Consumer Group. Similarly, in the UK, ‘The Good Shopping Guide’ application was launched in January 2011 by The Ethical Company Organisation and Friends of the Earth. At the time of writing this app is undergoing redevelopment. However, in its original and so far only iteration, it simply provides a mobile version of the information in the much-used printed text of the same name. Indeed, the ‘Good Shopping Guide’ app is particularly static in that it provides no mechanism for connection between users. Instead, it suggests minimal digital interaction by offering an email address for feedback and a link to the websites of its joint developers. In contrast, the ‘Shop Ethical!’ app attempts to facilitate some form of ‘movement building’ by way of user interconnection through a ‘Take Action’ function where users can, through various social media, share the ‘Shop Ethical!’ URL. This app also provides a link to the organisational/campaign websites of all the information sources utilised; as well as links to various other campaign and activist sites. However, such interaction remains circumscribed. While the ‘Shop Ethical!’ app facilitates sharing of the URL, digital connectivity is not used to build communities or groups of activists who provide information that is directly integrated into the app itself.

Both of these applications – as with the analogue/online guides on which they are based – ethically evaluate branded products and services across categories such as food, clothing, office and home supplies, toys, travel, energy, and health and finance. Both also employ a standard ‘symbol’ system; presenting the user with ranked lists of branded products in a particular category. We can take biscuits as an example. On ‘The Good Shopping Guide’ app major supermarket brands are given a tick, a question mark or a cross according to how the local and global activities of a particular biscuit manufacturer are scored in relation to environmental, animal welfare and human welfare criteria. The ‘Shop Ethical!’ app uses a similar range of positive to negative symbols – from a green ‘A’ to a red ‘F’ – for company and product performance in relation to environmental, social, animal and business ethics. These ratings – as with printed guides – are based on a variety of information sources. Information provided by non-government organisations predominates; such as that of Oxfam, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Christian Aid, Friends of the Earth, the World Wildlife Fund and so on. But information is drawn also from company, court and media reports, as

well as from research undertaken by government agencies, academic institutions, labour union bodies, and business organisations. A key point, as we have noted, is whether such rating systems and their results are ‘open’ to activists or users. When they are not open in this manner such systems effectively function as an external authority to those users; an authority that defines what is and is not ethical consumption.

Research-based information also frames a second small group of ethical consumption apps. Their point of difference from the apps discussed above is largely operational rather than political in that they act as mobile barcode readers. With these apps, the user simply points the mobile camera on their smart device at a product barcode and, once hovered or clicked, an ethical rating and company information appears on screen. One example of this is the US-based ‘Good Guide’ app (attached, through a feedback link, to the ‘Good Guide’ website). This app was launched in April 2010 (with the latest version released in January 2013, at the time of writing). Not only can users of this app scan and check the ethical status of a product while shopping, they can configure this information according to the principal areas of user concern; such as nutrition and health, climate change, environmental sustainability, Fair Trade or animal rights. Once again, however, this represents a rather limited use of digital techniques supporting user interaction. The ‘Good Guide’ app essentially provides a quick search mechanism based on pre-given information and offers no facility for users to connect directly to or affect the content of the app itself.

Finally, there is a third, diverse group of ethical consumption applications – often focused on single-issue campaigning – that rely to varying degrees on *crowdsourced* rather than merely centralised, research-based information (and that may or may not use barcode reader techniques). Here, some key digital political processes begin to gain greater purchase simply because such apps move towards a design – albeit in somewhat circumscribed ways – that is fundamentally dependent on users ‘building’ the app through adding information. For example, the ‘Buycott’ app, launched in January 2013, is conceived as a tool to bring one’s consumer spending in line with specific causes supported. Users (mostly US-based) can become ‘members’ of one or more of the hundreds of listed campaigns that seek to avoid (or, more rarely, support) products that are manufactured by a particular company. These campaigns are diverse (and often geographically local in character), ranging from a concern for civil, human and labour rights to environmental sustainability and economic justice. By scanning a barcode the users of the ‘Buycott’ app can access information that maps the brand and company connections of a specific product; thus ascertaining whether that product conflicts with a campaign they have signed on to. Importantly, this app relies significantly on user input. While company ownership information is based on formal research, users can report inaccuracies. More particularly, all campaigns (and the companies they are

designed to oppose or support) are listed by individuals and organisations utilising the app. For this reason, there is great variability in the information provided about a particular campaign; with some campaigns being the creation of lone users while others are linked to activist groups and websites.

The above app is certainly a little more dynamic than others we have so far examined, but with constrained consequences. The 'Buycott' app appears to somewhat debilitate rather than extend the encompassing umbrella of 'ethical consumption' – as a loosely integrated politics of the purchase – by rendering it a polyglot of often disconnected single issue campaigns. It is notable also that despite the attempt to involve and support interested users, who might be expected to form a community of interest/activism, the 'Buycott' app neither allows users to affect the structure of the app itself or connect with each other *across* the listed campaigns. At most, users are able to initiate or promote a specific issue. Moreover, users who sign on to a particular campaign are simply moved away from one information environment (the app interface) to another (the campaign creator page – through which 'members' can post comments on that specific issue or connect with informational websites). The app thus mirrors the tendency towards individuation embedded in so much of the discourse of ethical consumption; a subject we discuss later in this paper.

A small number of other apps that utilise crowdsourcing techniques do not so much engage with assessing companies, as with identifying place. This is important, since it remedies the predominant focus on the product alone as a bearer of the ethical and unethical, and so renders the ethics of various *sites of exchange* more visible. An Australian example is the 'fairlylocal' app, launched in April 2010. This utilises geo-positioning to inform users where to find local cafes or stores offering a range of Fair Trade products. Listings are added by the community of users, through the fairlylocal website. Although this website is centrally managed, the governance of this information, in terms of verification, appears to be left entirely to users themselves. We should also note, however, that users of the fairlylocal app clearly rely on observing the Fair Trade label at the sites they list, thereby indirectly retaining a reliance on the research-based identification – and organisational endorsement – of an ethical product.

And this brings us to one of the more recently developed of crowdsourced 'ethical' applications. Here, it is the product label that becomes the site of contestation, while a particular concept of openness governs the app design. The US-based 'OpenLabel' app was launched in December 2012 (with the latest version released in May 2015, at the time of writing). One notable characteristic of this app is its 'mainstream' development and focus. Reportedly 'backed by executives at Google, Facebook and Amazon', the 'OpenLabel' app seeks to couple the provision of 'trustworthy' (i.e. data-base sourced)



information on the sustainability of products with user-sourced information on the environmental, social, health and safety aspects of specific goods (Pratt, 2015). Users or ‘members’ of the app include individuals, activist groups and the organisations that supply research-based information. By scanning a barcode, users receive a selection of (sometimes contradictory) ‘reviews’ of the product (and/or the company that produces it), while they can add their own review or ‘label’ to that item. A product in this way attracts a score on the basis of how many user ‘labels’ either recommend or critique it.

The design of the above app certainly renders the barcode a site of ‘open’ and potentially diverse information. Indeed, it fosters a kind of activism of the label (dare we say; ‘lacktivism’). Nevertheless, the ‘OpenLabel’ app only rather minimally attempts to ‘grow community’ (as it puts it) by allowing users to ‘follow’ each other. More controversially, the app itself – or the data it gathers – is conceived as a new information source that can finance its digital presence through its very deployment of openness. The ‘OpenLabel’ developers aim to sell user data gathered through the app to businesses and corporations; presumably as a form of consumer feedback that may somehow encourage corporate responsibility (Pratt, 2015). This is a familiar theme of digital politics; the forming of what appears to be an open, commonly owned information repository but one that can only be mined by those who privately control it (Jordan, 2015).

### **The ethical and the digital**

To reiterate an earlier point, our delineation of three current types of ethical consumption application is on the basis of design and informational nuances, not on hard-and-fast differences. Presently, these apps tend to rely on providing research-based information, combining such information with a scanning facility, or on utilising both research-based and crowdsourced information. What is, however, common to all of the apps discussed above is their limited use. Many products are simply not rated on ethical consumption apps currently available. Moreover, these apps have limited impact in that their download rate and user engagement is marginal. They also, as we have suggested here, make a rather tentative use of originally digital techniques.

Of particular note – across all of the apps we have examined – is that the call to become a more active ethical consumer who moves ‘beyond the purchase’ to build ethical consumption as a collective politics (and who contributes to a knowledge of what is ethical) seems to be either absent or only cautiously articulated. That is, there is little effort to engage app users as digital ‘citizens’ in Postigo’s sense (Postigo 2012). Instead, ethical consumption apps stick largely to informing ‘consumer choice’ as their principal purpose; though they often do so with the secondary aim of gently engaging users in a broader politics of ethical consumption.

Despite this, the recent development of ethical consumption apps is very much a process in flux, with emerging differences. The above review of these apps suggests that there is presently a distinction between two kinds of digital resources for ethical consumption. The first of these digital resources are those that directly translate analogue information, thereby confirming the authority of external bodies to confer ethical legitimacy on a product or service. In contrast, the second set of digital resources are characterised by attempts to put users into conversation with each other and/or to enable users to contribute information.

As we have stressed, these two sets of digital resources should not be thought of as mutually exclusive. Rather, they have different emphases – and consequences – that reflect different background politics and may be invoked to varying degrees in the one application. In terms of the first set of digital resources, ethical consumption remains framed as involving a ‘mindful’ and perhaps politicised consumer who, in being motivated to base consumption choices on certain values, must turn to ‘reliable’ sources of ethical information. In relation to the second set of digital resources, authoritative, research-based information is not dismissed, but ethical consumption is understood as involving consumption activists who participate both in framing how the movement is conceived and in themselves authorising the ‘ethical’ information that is offered to other app users.

Complicating matters further is the realisation that the dispersed authority characteristic of this second, ‘activist’ invocation of digital resources is no simple process. Crowdsourcing information or creating communities of ethical consumers may well be perceived as a way of spreading the authority to judge what products are ethical and why. Yet this also involves a necessary partial transfer of authority to create and manage such ‘user interactions’ to those who are expert in the design of digital technologies. That is, invoking digital technocultures (and the originally digital techniques they utilise) also invokes the authority of programmers and computer experts who become, at least partially, the framers of user interaction. This is not to denigrate app design as a political practice or negatively compare it to a ‘non-expert’, more activist conception of political action. Rather, this observation underscores our point that an examination of ethical consumption apps reveals something about the nature of both ethical consumption *and* digital politics. In the latter case, there are clearly emerging political configurations – of which ethical consumption apps are one example – in which the digital is not simply to be always understood as a more horizontal and open form supporting Postigo’s digital citizens. On the contrary, the horizontal and open is itself a political and cultural choice that has to be embedded in and framed by the technical possibilities and limits of information technologies. Recognising such

design issues raises the further point that the making of an app, or other digital device, not only involves choice but problematizes the assumption that the digital will automatically help progress a particular politics; in our case, ethical consumption. This alerts us to the danger of falling into a determinist position which assumes that digital technologies will provide ‘solutions’; rather than seeing the task as one of defining an activist and political problem to which technologies are adapted and formed (Morozov 2014).

This two-sided view of the meaning of ethical consumption apps – as involving two sets of digital resources – reflects a central debate within much digital activist literature in which practices such as online petitions or using ‘likes’ on Facebook or other social media are termed ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’. Many ethical consumption apps currently available appear to court the same passivity. Here, the digital is seen as a means of reducing the scope of political involvement by allowing potential activists to feel they have fulfilled their ‘duty’ by simply clicking on a page or a website (or, in the case of ethical consumption, scanning a barcode). Activism may here be reduced to a momentary mouse press or scan, one that is bound-up with some external authority instructing the ‘clicktivist’ in what to support; or what to buy and avoid. This clearly contrasts with the potential for ethical consumption apps to enable more horizontal and open forms of practice (Karpf, 2012). While this contrast in relation to ethical consumption apps is only partial, it is one that helps us recognise the multiplicity of politics digital technologies may facilitate. What ethical consumption apps currently ‘do’ is not simply point us to the morally good purchase. They open up the issue of where authority lies in relation to defining ethical consumption and demonstrate how this relates to a political continuum running from consumers who make ethical purchasing choices to consumption activists who develop a social movement. This point is one that brings us to the critique of ethical consumption itself.

### **The trouble with ethical consumption**

In drawing consequences from this analytical survey of ethical consumption apps we need to tackle head on the core and much voiced critique of ethical consumption as, at best, politically dubious because of its apparently illegitimate conflation of citizen and consumer, of political action and purchasing. This critique has emerged already in the previous sections; we have argued so far that, overwhelmingly, digital apps for ethical consumption treat the user as an individualised, choice-making consumer, leaving other practices that treat users as movement actors largely nascent.

As a political discourse, ethical consumption is – at least on the face of it – resoundingly framed by government agencies, activist organisations, and social commentators as a form of ‘consumer power’. Indeed, the consciously choosing

consumer sits at the centre of this phenomenon (at least on first viewing). Ethical consumption websites routinely insist that we can and should as individuals match our shopping habits with our values and that our dollar or pound is our vote. Moreover, they readily privilege the role of information – provided variously through the guide, the app or the label – in driving ethical choice and, more broadly, in facilitating attitudinal and behavioural change in relation to how we participate in consumer economies.

All this has been vigorously contested by writers such as Lyon (2006), Guthman (2007), Johnston (2008), Goodman (2009), Varul (2009), Dolan (2010), Littler (2008 & 2011), Lewis and Potter (2011), Humphrey (2011), Goodman & Bryant (2013) Lekakis (2013b) and others. Few such critics simply reject current models of alternative consumption outright – and some, such as Littler and Lekakis, contend (as we do ourselves) that ethical, sustainable and Fair Trade consumption can be terrains of political impact and potential (Lekakis, 2013a; Littler, 2008). However, many writers have pointed to significant problems. Fair Trade, for example, has been seen to reproduce colonialist relations of romanticised charity and to have morphed from a politics of economic justice into a Northern neoliberal governance of Southern production standards. More broadly, ethical consumption – from ethical products to alternative retail spaces – appears to simply reinstate the ideology of the sovereign consumer and to mirror a neoliberal redesignation of citizenship as market agency.

These arguments are particularly relevant to our review of ethical consumption apps, not least because our comments on the partial failure of these apps to vigorously create activist communities or allow significant user input seems to largely confirm ethical consumption as a passive and individualised form of politics. Relevant here also is that much discussion of the rise of the digital world similarly connects its emergence to neoliberalism and individualisation (Dyer-Witheford, 2015). But all this is not quite the end of the story. Despite the weight of well-founded critique, ethical consumption remains a force to be reckoned with; if only because of its increasing prominence as an ‘alternative’ realm of production, distribution and exchange in western economies. In light of this, it is important to consider a more enthusiastic – and far from theoretically naive – embrace of ethical consumption as politically significant. Here, ethical consumption is seen to constitute a substantial challenge, especially in relation to unsettling the assumed distinction between citizenship and consumption and in relation to recalibrating our understanding of political mobilization and involvement. These ideas are associated most particularly with the work of Michele Micheletti and her colleagues in Scandinavia; and, in a slightly different vein, with the work of Clive Barnett and colleagues in the UK. Both these bodies of work ‘seek to counter the common view that the emergence of ethical consumption activities is a sign of the substitution of privatized acts of consumer choice for properly political forms of

collective action' (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke and Malpass. 2011:1). Essentially, Micheletti and colleagues counter such a view by re-envisioning individualized political consumption as a collective act, while Barnett and colleagues do so by displacing 'the consumer' as the core concern of ethical consumption activism. In both cases, these perspectives offer insights into the political nuances of digitalizing ethical consumption.

In building a case for what she has termed 'political consumerism' Micheletti (2003) unapologetically envisages the consumer as an agent of social change. This is no reassertion of a rank neoliberalism but, rather, a nod to the processes of individualization and reflexive life politics thought to be characteristic (following Giddens, Beck and others) of late modernity. For Micheletti, what distinguishes political consumers is that; 'Their choices are informed by political values, virtues and ethics' (Micheletti, 2003: x). This remakes notions of political action by dissolving the assumed barriers between public and private interests, and between economics and politics. Political consumerism, then, gives rise to a form of action that is citizen-based and market-oriented and that enables what Micheletti calls *individualised collective action*. Here, politics takes place outside the confines of the 'collectivist collective action' embodied in older forms of social movement opposition and beyond the realm of state-based regulatory intervention. Politically driven individual consumption decisions thus express self-interests but also link us to others making similar consumption choices and, in doing so, voice collective goals of global justice and environmental sustainability (Micheletti, 2003; see also Micheletti and Stolle, 2008).

This connects readily with a possible interpretation of digital consumption apps. Indeed, aspects of Micheletti's conceptualisation of the political consumer are certainly very close to the main function of the range of apps we have examined. The primary focus of many such apps is one of offering authoritative confirmation that a product 'really' is or is not a virtuous commodity to buy. Further, many apps appear to work with this underlying sense that individual acts of consumption can be collective acts of consumption politics.

Others have taken an alternative tack. Barnett, Cloke, Clarke & Malpass (2011), while recognising Micheletti's contribution to taking consumption seriously as a site of oppositional politics, remain sceptical of attempts to retain 'the consumer' as the political locus of ethical consumption. In fact, Barnett and colleagues are centrally interested in how the figure of the consumer is rhetorically mobilized in consumption politics in ways that sophisticate its message. Moving to grasp something of the field of agencies involved in the assemblage of ethical consumption as politics and practice, they see the campaigning organisations lying behind much ethical consumption activism not as valorizing neoliberal consumer choice but as fundamentally contesting

consumerism and embedding ethical consumption in broader movements for social change. They note also that ethical consumption is a complex political terrain in that it often promotes models of consumer agency that do not replace, but sit alongside, more collective or associational forms of political action (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke and Malpass, 2011: 22-23).

Once again, this sheds light on how we might begin to conceptualise the current state of ethical consumption apps. If Barnett and colleagues are correct in their identification of a more radical, but partially disguised, form of ethical consumption, then that radical form is only barely present in the apps we have examined. Moreover, this absence occurs despite the fact that there are clear possibilities in digital practices to enable the building of activist communities. Recent theoretical and empirical work, then, certainly develops our understanding of ethical consumption as politics. Yet, by implication it also highlights the manner in which ethical consumption apps continue to leave us grappling with the key issue of how activists and activism are to be conceived in this terrain. Is the ethical consumer to be primarily understood as a ‘shopper’, and thus in need of advice in making the correct choice or as an ethical activist who uses consumption as a tactic and, in doing so, must pursue connections to other activists in order to conceive of and implement these tactics? We would not wish to suggest that these two conceptions are mutually exclusive in everyday practice but their distinction is important in understanding what digital apps can tell us about ethical consumption as a lived politics in a digital age.

This distinction also tells us something about the politics of digital technocultures. In our examination so far of digital or information politics we have noted the potential both for the production of digital citizens, who participate in the making of their culture, and of a clicktivism, that individualises activists and satisfies any desire for political involvement with the easiest of actions; the click or scan. We have also noted that the much vaunted ‘horizontal’ and ‘open’ potentiality of digital technocultures is something that must be designed and implemented by experts and is no necessary result of simply engaging with such technocultures (Jordan, 2015). In recognising this tension, and in moving to a conclusion, we turn to offering a number of observations on the complex intertwining of the ethical and the digital that has been mapped throughout this article.

### **Revisiting the digital in the context of ethical consumption**

In light of the forgoing discussion, we want to suggest that digital apps for ethical consumption evoke and express two intersecting tensions. One tension sits within the nature of ethical consumption as a political framework, the other sits within the nature of digitally enabled political practices. In relation to the former, there is a clear tension in the politics of ethical consumption between an authorised consumer (who purchases

on the basis of external advice) and an authorising activist (who moves politics beyond the purchase). When it comes to the latter, there is an equally clear tension in politicised digital practices between a clicktivist (whose click legitimates and deactivates their political commitment) and a digitally enabled activist community that participates in its own building (through technocultures that attempt to propagate horizontal and open practices). This intersection of tensions occurs because ethical consumption and digital political practices share a key characteristic; they both exist between practice as an individualised choice authored by external agencies and practice as a collectively generated response that authors and authorises actions through activist engagement. They also intersect around mobility because digital apps, quite literally, make information and a connection with other like-minded people *electronically mobile*; while they can be utilised as well, through this very connectivity, to *politically mobilize* – in this case, around the figure of the ethical consumer. These intersecting tensions can be usefully traced across three issues that are pertinent to conceptualising the dynamics of both the ethical and the digital: complicity, subversion and agency. While our comments on these issues will be necessarily brief, they will form a backdrop to our concluding remarks.

### *Complicity*

Ethical consumption apps are clearly complicit in courting a neoliberal, informed choice consumerism, just as they are embedded in the contemporary technocultures of ceaseless connectivity, instantaneity, and ephemerality. However, beyond this standard ideological and cultural questioning of the figure of the ethical and digital consumer, there is a more powerfully indisputable complicity going on here; one that rests on the material rather than ideological. This is a deep complicity with a global digital technologies industry; one based on extensive resource extraction, highly exploitative labour practices, and an alarming rate of ‘e’ waste production. It is striking that in face of an exponential rise in numbers of tablets and smartphones – the devices on which apps are most likely to be used – there has only been a relatively small drop in the purchase of laptops and desktop computers. Apps and the devices on which they are used have thus produced highly intensified demands on global labour markets and on the natural resources needed to manufacture digital devices (Jordan 2015, 143-59; Dyer-Witthford 2015). In recognising this, we are not occupying a ‘pure’ position; academics such as ourselves continue to rely on this industry, and contemporary political activism must do so as well. It is notable, however, that not one of the applications we have examined acknowledges this contradiction in positioning its politics. To do so would perhaps unsettle notions of the ethical far too much. It would draw attention to the fact that as we interrogate a product with our iPhone, we perform the impossibility of ethical consumption at the same time as we make it more possible.

### *Subversion*

If we acknowledge the complicity of ethical consumption and of digital devices with both a neoliberal consumerism and a global technologies industry, are there also forms of subversion that simultaneously arise? Ostensibly, ethical consumption apps – like all ethical consumption advice formats – attempt to subvert at least some elements of the contemporary capitalist marketplace while invoking conventional market relations at the same time. They do this by announcing the hidden consequences of a purchase, as opposed to orthodox consumer advice that has traditionally emphasised what a product delivers to the consumer. If such ‘other-oriented’ advice is based on collectively generated knowledge, ethical consumption apps may also lend a new dynamism to that information and the subsequent consumer actions it encourages. Of course, all this may tend to enable *more* rather than simply more ethical consumption, leaving the logic of consumerism and ever increasing levels of acquisition unchallenged. But there are other possibilities. As we have argued, ethical consumption apps could provide a means of shifting the ground of the ethical from a focus on virtuous consuming to a collective interrogation of consumption practices. Indeed, they could do this in a way that articulates – through a digital device – exactly that nexus, identified by Barnett et. al., between the figure of the ethical consumer and a more associational political activism. This generally, in 2016, is not what ethical apps achieve. They do, however, render Micheletti’s ‘individualised collective action’ far less abstract by sometimes concretely facilitating interaction between app users, albeit in the very limited ways we have outlined above. In this – still rather ‘clicktivist’ – sense, ethical consumption apps currently allow users to take part in shared and ongoing political campaigning; a campaigning undertaken in direct, if still virtual, connection with both ethical consumption organisations and, to a lesser extent, other ethical consumers. A similarly partial mode of subversion is present also when it comes to the issue of agency.

### *Agency*

One of the lunacies of the notion of the sovereign consumer is that it fails to comprehend the socio-technical systems and infrastructures in which consumption has long been embedded. Much of the work on consumption as social practice has ably demonstrated how routine consumption is driven by the infrastructure-dependent, socio-technical design of everyday life. This design process constantly invokes and reframes social conventions, while it transforms much consumption into habitual action (Shove, Watson, Hand and Ingram 2007; Shove, Trentmann and Wilk, 2009). This work has in part also involved an attention to what we might call the non-human consumer; the washing machine, for example, that ‘autonomously’ consumes water, electricity and soap powder. Theories of social practice in this way displace the agency of consumption; linking it to routines and to things. It also frames change as a product of



purposeful, socio-technical and infrastructural reform, not as the result of ‘mindful’ acts of conscience consumption. Ethical consumption apps are similarly implicated in a displacement of consumer agency and mindfulness, especially in relation to products. Unlike the laborious effort of consulting a written guide, the app accelerates and automates the identification of ethical goods. Barcode readers are particularly implicated in this, since they allow the ingestion of minimal product information. Using a barcode reader, one can simply and quickly know whether to buy or to boycott, *but without necessarily knowing why*. Here, the app is sovereign and this has deeply contradictory implications for a politics of ethical consumption. On the one hand, this digital automation of the purchase of ethical products may well be an effective displacement of a particular form of agency in that it minimises the task of mindfulness – and the burden of constantly making an informed choice – in favour of a technological routine whereby the ethical status of a product is easily checked. On the other hand, this very disengagement with the ethical narrative of products seemingly undermines an associational and campaigning politics of consumption; reducing ethical choice to no more than programmed purchasing. This disengagement is an example of what we previously discussed as seeking technological solutions to ethical problems; it speaks of what Morozov calls ‘digital solutionism’, the presumption that there is a digital answer to any issue (Morozov 2014). Ironically, such a design of – and attitude towards – apps deradicalises digital technocultures, diminishing their potential for building activist politics.

## **Conclusion**

At each and every turn, ethical consumption apps seem to both promise and undo a possible politics of the purchase. Their hallmark is one of ambivalence: they critique commodities but are complicit with the capitalism that produces them; they court a subversion of the marketplace, but only (as yet) very partially; and they promise a consumer agency, but then technologically displace it. Yet, as we have argued throughout this article, these apps also offer us a way to better grasp the limits and possibilities of both ethical consumption as an oppositional terrain and, more broadly, of digitally-based political practices.

We have suggested, here, that ethical consumption apps currently engage very little with what we have called the horizontal and open potential of digital technocultures. Such apps appear to ensure that a contemporary ethical consumption falls back into a largely individualised and gestural politics. What is particularly striking is that this ‘falling back’ occurs even when such apps experiment with functions that have the potential to generate activist communities and/or enable the participation of users in the making of the app itself. If Postigo’s definition of the ‘digital citizen’ as one who actively participates in the making of a digital context is correct, then currently

available ethical consumption apps fall short of this mark. At best, they move only very tentatively towards an activist rather than consumer-centred engagement with the ethical.

However, this limitation might be sheeted home to the digital itself as much as to the ideologies of ethical consumption. As we have argued, political practices based on digital technocultures have their own dynamics. The turn to the digital does not *guarantee* more radical practices; it may indeed support and enable individualised and self-satisfied modes of engagement. This is to return to the tension between digital activists and clicktivists. A digital citizenry is a possible rather than inevitable outcome of designing and using an app; the app itself is no solution but one element of a broader infrastructure supporting political action. This tension in the digital is not always well recognised. Analysis of digital activism all too often points to its promise of horizontal and open practices. What it often downplays is the digital's ability to privatise and individualise by offering, through the screen of a device, a disconnection from political engagement while seeming to connect. Thus, while there is no doubt a radical potential to the digital, it remains a potential only (Jordan, 2015; Coleman, 2013). We might speculate further that a realisation of this potential rests on both a political imaginary and on an expertise in programming and information technology infrastructures that is able to ensure that the full capabilities of the digital are unleashed in particular contexts.

This may well be one of the principal reasons why the contemporary ethical consumption app remains problematic; the turn to the digital has tended, so far, to accentuate the already individualising tendencies within this terrain. Indeed, the current utilisation of the digital by advocates of ethical consumption does not so much break down authorities into horizontal and open networks as reinforce hierarchies in ways that largely reassure the ethical consumer that they need do no more than consult and depend on their app. This is, in part, due to a politico-technical issue in that any such utilisation of the digital requires a form of expertise – a knowledge of how best to design the digital for political purposes – that is not generally native to ethical consumption activists.

Perhaps, then, what we see with the intersection of ethical consumption and the digital is that the two have so far failed to bring together their more radical possibilities. However, this need not be an altogether bleak conclusion. It is, as we have already acknowledged, early days in the digitalization of ethical consumption and consumption activism more broadly. Moreover, it is clearly difficult (and often expensive) for social movement organisations to marshal the expertise and infrastructure needed to create more powerful – and politically challenging – digital apps. There is nevertheless scope for such apps to ably demonstrate how a 'consumer agency' can sit alongside more

collective or associational forms of political action. There is no reason why – by connecting to relevant expertise – ethical consumption apps cannot enable the construction of horizontal and open connections in the digital realm; connections that give impetus to a collective and ongoing challenge to excessive, destructive and wasteful systems of consumption.

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